

7/12/26

Marks of a Godly Ministry

Cornerstone Intro...

Read: 2 Corinthians 10:7–18

Introduction

Last week, John Marc preached from 2 Corinthians 10:1–6, where Paul described the nature of his ministry and instructed us in how to fight the spiritual battle. He reminded us that the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh. The battle is not against people, but against error, lies, and wrong thinking.

The section before us today continues to unfold Paul's philosophy of ministry. As he defends his apostleship against the false apostles, he shows us what a godly ministry looks like.

Main Point: 2 Corinthians 10:7–18 reveals three marks of a God-honoring ministry so that we seek Christ's commendation rather than man's approval.

Outline:

I. Godly Ministry is Evaluated by Biblical Faithfulness, Not Outward Appearance (7–11)

II. Godly Ministry is Measured by Exalting Christ, Not Self-Promotion (12–16)

III. Godly Ministry is Judged by the Lord's Approval, Not Man's Praise (17–18)

My prayer is that the Lord would equip us to discern a biblical ministry and seek His approval in all that we do.

I. Godly Ministry is Evaluated by Biblical Faithfulness, Not Outward Appearance (7–11)

Throughout this letter, Paul has defended his ministry in various ways. But in this larger section, 2 Corinthians 10:1–13:4, he directly answers the so-called "super-apostles," who had attacked his ministry and challenged his apostolic authority. As Paul defends his apostleship, he also gives us timeless instruction concerning the marks of a godly ministry.

Right away in verse 7, we are warned not to evaluate ministry by outward appearance. Look with me at verse 7 **"You are looking at things as they are outwardly."**

To judge by outward appearance is to judge by superficial criteria. A ministry may look polished, impressive, and successful while being shallow, corrupt, or even devoid of true spiritual life.

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We often evaluate ministries by large numbers, gifted speakers, elaborate programs, impressive facilities, strong branding, social media influence, and visible results. But none of those things, by themselves, prove biblical faithfulness.

A. W. Tozer once said, **“If the Holy Spirit was withdrawn from the church today, 95 percent of what we do would go on and no one would know the difference.”**

That is a serious warning because it reminds us that ministry can appear active and successful while still operating largely in human ability.

But biblically, the questions we need to ask regarding a ministry are things like: Is Christ the focal point? Is the Word of God being faithfully preached? Is the gospel clear? Are sinners being called to repentance and faith? Are believers being built up in holiness?

Is the church growing in love, unity, discernment, endurance, and obedience? Are leaders shepherding with humility and integrity? Is the ministry dependent on the Lord, His Spirit, and His Word? Or is it merely relying on man’s wisdom, personality, strategy, and strength?

Next, Paul then shows that those who belong to Christ should recognize a godly ministry. Look at the remainder of verse 7, **“If anyone is confident in himself that he is Christ’s, let him consider this again within himself, that just as he is Christ’s, so also are we.”**

The word translated **“confident”** carries the idea of being certain, being sure, or being convinced. If they were persuaded that they belonged to Christ, they needed to reconsider their evaluation of Paul.¹

If they could see the effects of Christ and the gospel in their own lives, they should also have recognized those marks in Paul’s life and ministry.

Our judgment of a ministry cannot be based on communication skills, a dynamic personality, or an impressive appearance. It must be based on evidence of genuine union with Christ.

Is the life of Christ evident in that minister? Is the fruit of Christ displayed in that ministry? If not, then no matter how thriving it appears, it is not truly blessed by God. But if those marks are present, then even without worldly signs of success, it is pleasing to the Lord.

Our discernment is also connected to our growth in Christ. The closer we walk with Christ and the more our minds are renewed by His Word, the more clearly we will recognize what reflects Him.

¹ Paul will later address the fact that these “super apostles” were not in Christ at all.

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Next, Paul shows that godly ministry uses spiritual authority to build up God's people, not to tear them down. Look at verses 8–9, **“For even if I boast somewhat further about our authority, which the Lord gave for building you up and not for destroying you, I will not be put to shame, 9 for I do not wish to seem as if I would terrify you by my letters.”**

Paul exercised his authority like a true shepherd. His ministry was corrective, but not abusive or self-serving. The Lord had given him authority to build up the church in faith, holiness, and Christlikeness. Even when he confronted sin, his purpose was not to crush or intimidate them, but to instruct them in the truth and restore them to faithful obedience.

This also connects back to verses 4–6, which Pastor John Marc covered last Sunday. Paul destroyed fortresses but not people. He destroyed false arguments, speculations, and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God. He teaches believers to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. His purpose was to destroy error, not the people caught in it.

Next, Paul teaches us that godly ministry is not measured by giftedness but by faithfulness. Look with me at verse 10 **“For they say, “His letters are weighty and strong, but his personal presence is unimpressive and his speech contemptible.”**

Paul's opponents described his letters as harsh, forceful, and demanding, but his personal presence as weak and unimpressive. They assumed that stature, appearance, and speaking ability were reliable indicators of spiritual authority. That is how the world evaluates leaders, but it is not how God's people should evaluate ministry.

God told Samuel in **1 Samuel 16:7**, **“Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”**

Think also about John the Baptist, he lived in the wilderness and ate locusts and wild honey. I want you to imagine the type of physical presence a man like that would have. Leather skin and frail come to mind. But Jesus said, **“Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist!” (Matthew 11:11).**

Physical strength and natural giftedness are not wrong. But it is wrong to use outward presence as the measure of spiritual maturity or ministry effectiveness. Paul's opponents also said his speech was **“contemptible.”** His delivery did not compare favorably with the polished rhetoric of the Greek orators.

But faithful ministry is not ultimately about giftedness. As Robert Murray M'Cheyne said, **“It is not great talents God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is [an incredibly powerful] weapon in the hand of God.”**

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That is why Paul responds in verse 11, **“Let such a person consider this, that what we are in word by letters when absent, such persons *we are* also in deed when present.”**

Some ministers can articulate biblical convictions from the pulpit but succumb to the fear of man when it is time to confront sin or address difficult issues. Paul was not that kind of minister. What he was in word when absent, he would also be in deed when present. His ministry was marked by faithful consistency.

As we consider these first observations from our passage, we need to recognize that the history of the church contains sorrowful examples of ministries that appeared successful while hiding serious corruption.

One example is Jim Bakker and the PTL ministry in the 1980s. Bakker was a nationally known televangelist with celebrity-like recognition, a massive platform, and Heritage USA, a Christian theme park and resort. By outward standards, it looked like a thriving and blessed ministry.

Bakker raised hundreds of millions of dollars through “lifetime partnerships” promising lodging benefits that the ministry could not fulfill, while ministry funds supported lavish living.

He was convicted in 1989 on fraud, conspiracy, and tax evasion charges. Bakker was released from prison in 1994 and returned to televangelism in 2003. He found himself in trouble again in 2021 for selling a product called “Silver Solution” that he claimed cured COVID.²

The lesson is not that numbers, buildings, influence, or visible growth are inherently wrong. It is that none of them prove a ministry’s faithfulness. God’s people must know Scripture and sound doctrine well enough to evaluate ministry by biblical faithfulness rather than outward success.

Paul wanted the Corinthians to understand that true ministry is not measured by outward appearance, but by faithfulness to Christ. And now, in the next section, he shows us that a ministry is also measured by who receives the glory.

II. Godly Ministry is Measured by Exalting Christ, Not Self-Promotion (12–16)

In these verses, Paul draws a clear contrast between the focus of the false apostles and the focus of a true minister of Christ.

² <https://www.uspis.gov/history-spotlight/heritage-usa-fraud> (Accessed on: 7/8/26)

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First, we see that godly ministry does not compare itself to others for the sake of self-promotion. Look at verse 12, **“For we are not bold to class or compare ourselves with some of those who commend themselves;”**

Paul’s tone here is intentionally ironic or sarcastic. He is essentially saying, “I would not dare to place myself in the same category as these men who are so eager to commend themselves.”

One Bible translation puts it this way: “I wouldn’t dare say that I am as wonderful as these other men who tell you how important they are” (NLT).

Paul refuses to engage in their system of comparison because the entire standard is corrupt. These men thought highly of themselves. They were their own biggest cheerleaders. They advertised their own importance, celebrated their own accomplishments, and elevated themselves before others.

But look at the rest of verse 12, **“but when they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are without understanding.”**

When man becomes his own standard, he will always find a way to approve himself. Such a standard is subjective, self-serving, and constantly moving. Rather than humbly measuring themselves by the objective standard of Christ and His Word, they created a system designed to commend themselves.

It also fails to recognize that anything good produced in us or through us is the result of God’s grace. And that is where Paul turns next.

Next, in verses 13–14 we find that a godly ministry is focused on being faithful with what God has appointed. Paul writes, **“But we will not boast beyond *our* measure, but within the measure of the sphere which God apportioned to us as a measure, to reach even as far as you. 14 For we are not overextending ourselves, as if we did not reach to you, for we were the first to come even as far as you in the gospel of Christ;”**

Notice the contrast at the beginning **“But we.”** Paul’s boasting is entirely different from theirs. He will not boast **“beyond measure.”** In other words, he refuses to exaggerate what he has done, overstate his importance, or take credit for what ultimately God has done.

Paul is not saying that talking about what God has done through you is wrong. He is saying that boasting in a way that is self-centered, comparative, or devoid of acknowledging it all comes from God is wrong.

Paul says, **“but within the measure of the sphere which God apportioned to us as a measure, to reach even as far as you.”** What does this mean? The language of **“measure”** and **“sphere”** emphasizes that his ministry was assigned to him by God.

The Lord had called Paul as an apostle to the Gentiles, entrusting him with the gospel to the uncircumcised. Paul makes this clear in...

Galatians 2:7, 9 (NASB95)

7 But on the contrary, seeing that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter *had been* to the circumcised... 9 and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, so that we *might go* to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.³

So when Paul came to Corinth, he was not overstepping his authority or intruding into another man's field. Corinth was part of the Gentile mission God had assigned to him. Though the false apostles likely accused him of going beyond his rightful sphere, Paul makes clear that his ministry among the Corinthians was in faithfulness to God's call.

That is why he says in verse 14, **“we were the first to come even as far as you in the gospel of Christ.”** Paul's authority in Corinth was legitimate. God had assigned him that field of ministry, and his gospel labor had actually reached them. He had not overextended himself.

Next, we find that godly ministry is focused on advancing the gospel not getting self-glory. Look at verses 15–16 **“not boasting beyond *our* measure, *that is*, in other men's labors but with the hope that as your faith grows, we will be, within our sphere, enlarged even more by you, 16 so as to preach the gospel even to the regions beyond you, *and* not to boast in what has been accomplished in the sphere of another.”**

Paul says that he and his co-laborers did not boast in the work of others as if it were their own. They were not seeking recognition or credit for what someone else had done. They were simply seeking to be faithful with the ministry God had entrusted to them.

It appears that Paul's opponents had come to Corinth and tried to take credit for work Paul had already established. They boasted as if they were the reason for the good things happening in the church. But biblical ministry does not use ministry for self-glory.

Paul was not interested in building a platform, gaining recognition, or taking credit for another man's labor. Paul's goal was not to make much of himself, but to make much of Christ through

³ See also: Romans 1:5–6; 1:13; 11:13; 15:15–21; Galatians 1:15–16; Ephesians 3:1–9; Colossians 1:25–27; 1 Timothy 2:7; Acts 9:15; 13:46–48; 18:6; 22:21; 26:17–18.

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the continued advance of the gospel. His ambition was to see the Corinthians grow in faith so that the gospel could advance beyond them into regions where Christ had not yet been preached.⁴

Godly ministry has an outward aim. It wants Christ preached, churches strengthened, saints matured, and the gospel carried farther even when that requires hard work and sacrifice.

The reason a godly ministry must reject self-promotion is that no minister and no ministry can save anyone. The world does not need to hear about us or our philosophy of ministry. It needs to hear about Christ and His gospel.

Christ is the One sent by the Father. He came into the world, was born of a virgin, and was born under the law.

He lived the perfect life we could never live and obeyed God's law completely. As the last Adam, our new representative, He was the perfect man and the perfect God-man. He was tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin.

He came to offer Himself as a substitute in the place of sinners. He went to the cross and endured terrible physical suffering, but far more than that, He bore the wrath of God against our sin. He truly died, was buried, and rose again on the third day. He now sits at the right hand of the Father, awaiting the day appointed for Him to return and claim all creation as His own.

In His first coming, He came to save sinners. In His second coming, He will judge all who have rejected Him and His offer of mercy.

This is the message God has ordained to save. As sinners hear the truth of what Christ has done and what is still to come, God grants them faith to believe, they repent of their sin, and they turn to Christ as Savior and Lord. That is why godly ministry does not promote itself. It exalts Christ and His gospel.

And if Christ alone is worthy of the glory, then His approval must be the only approval that ultimately matters. That is where Paul turns next...

III. Godly Ministry is Judged by the Lord's Approval, Not Man's Praise (17–18)

Paul now brings this entire section to its climax. He has warned against judging ministry by outward appearance. He has exposed the foolishness of comparing ourselves with ourselves. He has explained that his ministry was assigned to him by God and that his great ambition was to see the gospel advance into new regions.

⁴ See also: Romans 15:23–24

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But even faithful ministry and genuine gospel fruit can become occasions for pride if we begin taking credit for what God has done. So Paul directs all boasting away from the minister and toward the Lord. Look at verse 17, **“But he who boasts is to boast in the Lord.”**

Paul is drawing from **Jeremiah 9:23–24**, which Darin read this morning. There the Lord says that the wise man must not boast in his wisdom, the mighty man in his strength, or the rich man in his riches. Instead, anyone who boasts must boast that he understands and knows the Lord.

Paul is not saying that we can never acknowledge ministry fruit or speak about what has been accomplished. Throughout his letters, Paul reports what happened through his ministry. But whenever Paul speaks of his labor, he traces everything back to the grace, power, and faithfulness of God.

He says in **1 Corinthians 15:10**, **“By the grace of God I am what I am.”** He says in **1 Corinthians 3:6–7**, **“I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth.”** And in **2 Corinthians 4:7**, he explains that God has placed the treasure of the gospel in weak earthen vessels so that **“the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves.”**

That is what it means to boast in the Lord. It means that all boasting must always come back to Him. It was His calling, His authority, His assignment, His gospel, His power, His fruit, and we are ultimately seeking His approval.

As believers we can never say, “Look at what I have done.” That would be dangerously close to talking like Nebuchadnezzar. Instead, we always say, “Look at what Christ has done.”

We must reject thoughts of, “Look at how gifted I am.” We must ask ourselves, “what do we have that we haven’t been given?” We always say, “Look at how gracious Christ has been.”

Christ is the only true hero of Christian ministry. Pastors do not save sinners. Missionaries do not open blind eyes. Biblical counselors do not transform hearts. Teachers do not sanctify the church. We may preach, teach, counsel, pray, shepherd, and serve, but only Christ can give life, cause growth, produce fruit, and transform His people through His Word and Spirit.

Paul knew that he was not the hero. He had not died for their sins. He had not risen from the grave. He had not reconciled them to God. He was merely a servant through whom they had believed.

The same must be true in every godly ministry. We can be grateful for faithful pastors, teachers, missionaries, counselors, and servants. We can recognize their labor and imitate their faith. But we must never give the servant the glory that belongs to the Savior.

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We do not want people captivated by a ministry, or captivated by a church, or captivated by a ministry. We want people being captivated by Christ.

Recently a family here turned us on to a Christian music artist. And this weekend we were listening to a song, “In Christ” as we were driving and I found the lyrics so fitting: “Christ my righteousness. Christ my holiness. Christ who took my sin. Christ alive in me. Christ my only boast. Christ my living hope. Christ who raised these bones. Christ and Christ alone.”

At the fiftieth anniversary of Grace Community Church, John MacArthur didn't point people to himself. He said the story of the church was “the work of the Word of God through the Spirit of God.” That is the perspective every faithful servant should have.

Paul continues in verse 18: **“For it is not he who commends himself that is approved, but he whom the Lord commends.”**

The word **“for”** explains why our boasting must be in the Lord. Self-commendation proves nothing. A person can speak highly of himself, promote his accomplishments, gather favorable comparisons, and persuade others that he is successful. But none of that determines whether the Lord approves of him.

Paul's opponents were commending themselves. They created their own standards, compared themselves with one another, and then declared themselves successful. But Paul understood that the only verdict that finally matters is the verdict of Christ.

The word translated **“approved”** carries the idea of something that has been tested and proven genuine. Any minister can promote himself or gain the praise of men. But it is what the Lord says about his ministry that matters.

In fact, we have seen this same idea throughout 1 and 2 Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians 3:8–15, Paul taught that each servant will receive his reward according to his labor and that the quality of every man's work will be tested by fire.

In 1 Corinthians 4:1–5, he said that ministers are stewards of Christ who must be found faithful. He was not ultimately governed by human judgment, or even by his own evaluation of himself, because **“the one who examines me is the Lord.”** When Christ returns, He will expose the motives of the heart, **“and then each man's praise will come to him from God.”**

In 1 Corinthians 9:24–27, Paul said he disciplined himself so that, after preaching to others, he would not be disqualified. In 1 Corinthians 10:31, he commanded believers to do everything for the glory of God. And in 1 Corinthians 15:58, he urged them to remain steadfast and always abound in the work of the Lord, knowing that their labor in the Lord is not in vain.

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Paul said that his conscience testified that he had conducted himself with holiness and godly sincerity, not by fleshly wisdom but by the grace of God (2 Corinthians 1:12). He said that he preached sincerely, **“as from God”** and **“in the sight of God”** (2 Corinthians 2:17). He refused hidden and shameful practices and instead commended himself to every man’s conscience **“in the sight of God”** (2 Corinthians 4:2).

Then, in 2 Corinthians 5:9–10, John Marc exhorted us from these verses: **“We also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ.”** Paul knew that he would one day stand before Christ and give an account for how he had lived and labored.

In 2 Corinthians 6:3–10, Paul commends himself as a servant of God not through self-promotion, but through endurance, purity, patience, love, truth, and the power of God. In 2 Corinthians 8:21, he says that he was careful to do what was honorable not only in the sight of men, but also in the sight of the Lord.

This was the orientation of Paul’s entire ministry. He lived with a constant awareness God and His evaluation. He labored as a steward who would give an account. He sought to glorify Christ, build up the church, remain faithful to his calling, and ultimately receive the Lord’s commendation.

So, ask yourself “Am I living for the approval of people, or for the commendation of Christ?” Eventually we will all die. Every external sign of ministry success. All the applause and praise of men will go silent. But there will be one voice you will want to hear. The voice of Christ.

May we all long to hear, “Well done, good and faithful slave.” As we stand before Him on that day.

Let’s pray

Benediction: **Hebrews 13:20–21 (NASB95)**

²⁰ Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, *even* Jesus our Lord, ²¹ equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom *be* the glory forever and ever. Amen.